



radical

democracy

interview:
Winnie Wong
food not bombs
occupy wall street, occupy sandy
people for bernie sanders
#feelthebern

David Olson interviews Winnie Wong

Winnie Wong is a digital strategist and activist, and a founding organizer of Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Sandy. She co-founded the popular People For Bernie Sanders collective, and created the viral political hashtag, #FeelTheBern. With over one million followers on Facebook, the group remains an influential organizing and messaging hub of the Left. We spoke in fall, 2016, shortly before the Democratic National Convention.

A second interview with Winnie appears in the Radical Democracy magazine on Medium.com.



Radical Democracy: Last summer, the National Nurses Union hosted the first People's Summit, with over 3,000 activists and organizers who had supported the Bernie Sanders campaign. One objective was begin to layout a post-election strategy. As one of the co-conveners of the Summit, what were you hoping would happen during the conference?

Winnie Wong: For one thing, I hoped to get three thousand people into working groups for facilitated conversations — very similar to the conversations that happened during the occupation of Zuccotti Park, where working groups would break out and have facilitated dialogue. And that did happen in Chicago, on Saturday morning, right after the incredible morning panel, “Understanding Our Movement Moments.”

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It was amazing to witness three thousand people sitting at tables of ten, with a facilitator, discussing what they had just experienced — during the “stories from the field” portion, then the panel with Michael Lighty, Becky Bond, Fran Piven, and also Dominique Scott from United Students Against Sweatshops. I think that was an outstanding representation of where we're at in the Movement. It was just incredible to see the participation and the interest. It was really an example of how, after experiencing and learning together, you can get together and talk about it. Like Occupy Wall Street — it had that feel.

That was a personal goal: to have those discussions with an intentional construct, getting people to actually talk about what they want to do next and how they plan on doing it. Whether it means joining a local chapter of a group, like Democratic Socialists of America, or Progressive Democrats of America, or running for a local office. We gave people options in an app that we designed to show their level of participation and what they wanted to do next. And this was not, by any means, the end of the discussion — these conversations are going to continue. It's very interesting to have a group of progressive and grassroots organizations at the table discussing

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what a continuations committee might look like, and how we are going to build the Movement. At the end of the day, it's about the Movement, not electoral politics. While electoral politics are important, without a strong Movement they don't really serve the purpose of elected officials representing people.

RD: It was inspiring being with so many different groups—sometimes with different goals, sometimes focused on different issues, but all connected. One of the challenges, I think, will be how to increase collaboration within this “Movement of movements,” while staying horizontal.

WW: **In the age of the Internet, decentralization and distributed organizing is truly the only way forward.** It's not really my problem if more traditional organizations don't understand that. My work is to make sure we continue to organize within our communities. And it's very hard to answer this question unless you really understand what is happening in this moment, right now.

There will be no such thing as a "Super MoveOn" to come out of this. That's not going to happen, and we're not moving toward a Super Democracy for America. Democracy for America and MoveOn

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are going to be a part of this conversation, and of this continuation of movement-building. If they don't want to be a part of it, that's really their loss. You see what I'm saying? **Movements are building power.** The founders of Black Lives Matter, for instance — Alicia Garza, Opal and Patrisse — those three women are more powerful and influential than MoveOn right now, even if they don't have as large an email list. That's a non-trivial comment I'm making here, right?

It goes into a much further elaboration of what is really happening about the redistribution of social capital, and how the Internet has made this all possible. So, there's no such thing as a Super-MoveOn to emerge out of this moment — and I can say that with conviction. **What we can look forward to are decentralized communities of people organizing toward the end-goal, which is justice.** That is, I think, a pretty definite statement, and a very important distinction to make. It's decentralized, and it's too late to centralize this energy. You cannot centralize the Internet. You cannot centralize opinion. It is impossible to do that now.

If you look at the history of how people have used

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the Internet over the past ten years, up until 2008 or even 2011 — the first few years of Barack Obama's administration — people were mostly producing opinions on platforms like Yelp, and the opinion was based on a transaction, or after consumption.

Whether they ate a falafel at a restaurant, or bought a shirt from Target, they would go to a platform like Yelp and produce their opinion.

That all changed in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, and this might help give you some context as to why we did what we did. After 2011, and even during the Arab Spring, you saw people using platforms like Facebook and Twitter to broadcast, in real time, images of protest and suppression. That was the arc through 2011 and 2012. A lot of that Internet usage was images: mostly images of protests, but also images of community in public spaces where people were having these conversations.

In 2013 and 2014, the Internet began to change. And that is really where we're at right now, with people using the Internet to organize. And this is very important. **We are not talking about meeting in a coffee shop. We are talking about the Internet being a space for discussing radical ideas and opinions. And producing opinion, producing thought.**

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Without net neutrality, without the work of people who have been fighting for it since 2010 — people like Aaron Swartz — we would not be in this moment. I would not have been able to achieve what I've achieved over the last couple of years, certainly. Because, at the end of the day, you have corporations wanting to control it. I don't think they ever anticipated that an Internet they assumed would be used for marketing purposes could be turned on them — by the people, working together, to market the political revolution.

I don't think Comcast ever imagined that what they'd envisioned as a platform to sell ad space to — just like Super Bowl airtime — would make #feelthebern a global meme. A hashtag carrying the narrative across multiple platforms across the world. Do you think people in China know about Bernie Sanders because this campaign made sure Chinese citizens knew about him? No. They saw the hashtag. On Vivo, on Xiaomi, on different platforms that actually use hashtags. And this is bigger than most people are able to grasp.

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RD: I think a generation gap exists in terms of the game-changing quality of the Internet, of using social media for organizing, Movement-building...

WW: Well, **you have to use the Internet in an intentional way in order to actually see some serious change.** The theoretical folks don't really understand that the design is there, the plan is there for you to use. It's a wide-open playing field. If you're being extremely theoretical about it and not actually attempting to participate; if you're sitting in your ivory tower not actually participating in the Twitter Storm, then I can only say, "Well, you're wrong." *[laughs]* 'Cause here's the data, you know?

I'm a Marxist. I'm very well read in my Italian philosophy. So let's be clear: **the Internet is the counter-hegemonic force right now.** The Movement is largely happening on the Internet. Did it turn out people to the polls? It didn't turn out enough people, but it certainly turned out thirteen-million-plus people who voted for a democratic socialist. That wasn't all the Internet's doing, it was a lot of organizing and door knocking and phone banking, as well. But it was really that distributed model that turned it all out.

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Until last August no one knew who Bernie Sanders was. He's a global phenomenon now. And that is because of the Internet. It has nothing to do with the campaign. It was the Internet that onboarded hundreds of thousands of people, who committed to volunteering for him either by phone banking, or by door knocking, or by continuing to participate in this "clicktivism." Which, of course, is not without its faults.

RD: In the '60s, there was this huge focus on organizations' mailing lists. With SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] or SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], etcetera, their organizational skirmishes — and alliances — were often based around whether or not they were going to share their mailing lists. I realized, that's sort of all gone, that list-guarding approach to organizing. We all share now...

WW: It's all gone, yeah. It's still not entirely irrelevant. But it's being outpaced by other distributed forms of organizing.

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RD: Sometimes I get the feeling that the Movement isn't dealing aggressively enough with the fact that the powers-that-be still hold control over the network, in the big picture. The FCC just recently upheld net neutrality, but —

WW: Title II, yes. Many of my close friends are organizers and activists for net neutrality, so I was following that very closely, and I think it was a success. Upholding Title II is good. But it doesn't go far enough, and that's why we have to keep organizing.

RD: It *was* good, but it also makes me nervous. The corporations are re-figuring their attack, I'm assuming. They want badly to keep control of this communication beast. We got a victory, but they're not rolling over.

WW: Well, the GOP, for instance, have no desire to let us dismantle their agenda. They're absolutely starting to realize that what's happening now, what's happened over the course of the past five years, is actually effectively, rapidly dismantling their

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Southern Strategy. And this is what we're actually dealing with at this moment in time. What we're doing is accelerating the toppling of the strategy put into place decades ago that has effectively kept poor working people down, and particularly people of color. Right? So, that's all changing rapidly.

The GOP are ferocious advocates against net neutrality, and a lot of lawsuits are coming. But I don't think that they will win, unless we turn into a complete state of

censorship. Especially with millennials gaining power as they are — which is why a Trump presidency is so dangerous. He is displaying these fascist tendencies and doing it without a strategy. That's the thing that is so alarming to me — I'm not sure that Donald Trump's censorship is at all similar to some of his cohorts in the Republican Party. His is really very much an "I" stance — like, "I will suppress you if you make fun of my hairpiece." It really has less to do with, "I will suppress you, because you're actually achieving the impossible, which is affecting shareholder prices in Monsanto stock." You see what I'm saying?

RD: Right. It's based in ego, not profit.

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WW: Very different. So the danger, of course, is making sure that we hold on to the House and the Senate. Which is really why it's important for leftists to have an electoral strategy. This is why I do the work that I do. **We have to make sure that we win the House and the Senate if we want to actually continue to change the world. I mean, how much more obvious can it get?**

RD: This gives me hope: That folks today sprint right past what was previously a debate in the Movement about reform or revolution, and working inside the system to reform it versus working outside to dismantle and transform it. We don't have a problem saying that we need to protest in the streets, and yes, we need to sometimes attack and talk about dismantling institutions or systems, but that we also we also need to win inside the system, and get our people within the system.

WW: That's correct. And the reality is that when you make a comment like that, it's not entirely true. Look at Fred Hampton. He was murdered because he actually started to organize brown people into running for office. He was a young man. At the time of his murder he was twenty-one, and he was murdered in cold blood by the government.

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If you look back on what he was doing, he was actually prompting large numbers of people to run for office. And at that time, no way were they going to let that occur. It was too dangerous. Then it's four decades later, and we're all Fred Hampton.

But the thing is, they can't murder me in cold blood at home. They just can't do that. It's impossible. There's too many of us, and we're not all Black. I'll say it. I'm Asian-American. Many Occupy Wall Street organizers were white. Some of them are extremely anti-electoral organizing, and others are not. It's a big tent. But we really expanded that tent.

It's about keeping one eye on the government and the other on the crusade. It's important to support all forms of radical organizing. That's my opinion. And to see that all forms of radical organizing — everything, all of it — are tactical. If more organizers realized that what they were embarking on is just one avenue of a tactic, we would probably be in a better place. And not really be attached to whatever it is that we're actually doing, you know? That sounds flippant, but it is how I feel. I'm not particularly sentimental when it comes to abandoning a tactic and moving on to the next.

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RD: That echoes something that someone from SNCC told me about always being ready to shift tactics. Some things work for a while — going back to the '50s, the sit-in came out of nowhere, and for a couple of years sit-ins swept the South and made headlines, putting cracks in this hegemonic culture. And then suddenly, the Sit-In Movement was gone. It wasn't working any more. And the SNCC person told me, that was fine. They moved on to something else, just relentlessly pushing forward.

WW: **Yes, it *is* about being relentless. It's about making sure that your commitment to the struggle is**

unending. This is why I have a great deal of respect for Bernie Sanders. I'm not attached to Bernie in the same way that so many of the people who have just joined the political revolution are. I'm not attached to him at all. But I have a lot of respect for him because I think he is a deeply committed activist. Just because he's been an elected official for decades doesn't mean he's not an activist. And he's shown his true colors over the course of this election cycle. Again, he's not the leader of the Movement — he's a part of it, and I think he knows that.

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He knows everything rests on successful tactics over the course of these next four years. I predict that sit-ins will make a comeback, and I think that's exciting. I don't think they ever went away, they just weren't a regular occurrence in protests. But with the recent wins of the Divestment Movement on campuses across America, a lot of those victories were won by students who sat-in.

RD: Ella Baker, the SNCC adviser and Freedom Movement organizer said, "In order to see where we are going, we must not only *remember* where we have been, but *understand* where we have been." How important is it for people to understand where we have been, in regards to the current calls for radical social change and political revolution? How important is looking back and understanding Movement history?

WW: I think it's extremely important. **The crisis we face over the next couple of years is getting people politically educated quick enough.**

That's a real challenge: make sure young people actually absorb the history, retain it, and think critically. You really can't think critically if you don't have the necessary context. There are numerous challenges ahead for us. This is why Wikipedia was such a game-changer, right?

RD: Absolutely. We're in an education revolution, too.

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WW: Young people are brilliant. They really are. They absorb information and produce the reaction, the response, very quickly. And they're enormously creative. I think it's very important that those of us who are tasked with creating content — creating education for young folks — curate it very carefully. We're seeing institutions, especially institutions of higher learning, become less and less relevant. This notion of the Ivy League or the Ivory Tower is becoming increasingly archaic, and we'll see more of this in the years ahead. I know that's a radical thing to say, but, again, I'm a visionary, and not prone to hold onto the old.

We are looking at several hundred years of that mythology being dismantled. And that's terrifying for lots of people, but certainly not for sixteen-year-olds, especially given the fact that they're faced with the prospect of going to a college that won't be free. Going to an institution of higher learning, where they're going to be saddled with enormous amounts of debt, when they could just go online and get what they need — it's really about that interception, that piece that we really have to keep an eye on, for those of us on the front lines of transformational change.

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RD: Researching this project, I learned how little I actually knew about organizing and movement history. I almost cried when I read about the challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party [MFDP] at the '64 Convention. I thought, how did I not learn about this?

WW: That's right.

RD: Nobody in power wanted that piece of history to be remembered. Learning about the MFDP was sort of a turning point for me, realizing how many of the important things are not in the history books — especially when it comes to the people organizing.

WW: Yeah, they scrubbed it. But now that history is coming back, you know?

RD: Yes. That's a big part of what RD is trying to do. Bernie's challenge at the convention — the Movement's challenge — has similarities to '64. It's not explicitly about race this time, but it *is* about the Democratic Party keeping people out. The MFDP got shut-down at the Convention, but the Dems did desegregate all State delegations — the main demand — and pass the Voting Rights Act the next year.

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RD con't: Maybe we've got an opportunity to move the needle like that with the Bernie delegates at this Convention...

WW: I don't think change is going to come from the inside. I think the **change is always going to come from the outside**. So, 'twas, ever thus. There are some groups doing some really terrific organizing on the outside, led by great grassroots activist groups doing the necessary organizing to make sure that they confront in an intentional way. And when I use the word confront, I mean confront the State, confront power. And who represents power in the State more than the police?

So there will be well-organized groups who are going to be confronting that State power outside – I think that those folks are actually going to achieve something, because the whole world *will* be watching. So that's good. But there will be other folks who probably will be a little misguided, and run around, and flail, and protest, and yell, and scream. And that's fine too, you know? And that will also be captured by the media. The whole world will also be watching that. So, again, it really depends on who packages and distributes that content. Because, whoever controls the media controls the message – that's true.

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WW: But I really have no illusions about this "win" on the inside. I think that the Sanders folks, the nineteen hundred delegates heading to the convention, are passionate about the person that they voted for and passionate about the year they've given up to campaign for him and for each other. They are going to do their best to represent the issues that Bernie is lobbying so aggressively for. And none of those issues are radical, to be clear.

It is absolutely insane to me that the establishment, the Democratic Party elite, are opposing a fifteen-dollar-an-hour federal minimum wage. It's unacceptable. It's morally bankrupt. People are starving, in inner cities and in rural America. They cannot afford to live. They cannot afford to eat. They cannot afford to send their children to school. They cannot afford to buy food for their children. It is insane. Bernie is really advocating for just these basic necessities. Single-payer healthcare? It's absurd. So, those folks who are going to be on the inside are going to be lobbying for him, to make sure that a progressive Democratic platform is passed, one that includes a fifteen-dollar-an-hour federal minimum wage, single-payer healthcare, and an end to fracking.

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RD: Yes, there's both an inside and an outside strategy at work here, which is important.

I'd like to throw another quote at you, from what I think is an important and overlooked document from the New Left. It's from the SDS Radical Education Project in '66: **"The objective of any radical Movement is to break down false consciousness. It seeks to reveal to an individual, by facts, by emotionally powerful experience, and by argument, the realities of his actual life situation."** Do you agree? Is that a primary objective of this movement today?

WW: It's a hundred percent accurate, and we're a hundred percent doing it right now. It's absolutely true. If you look at the creativity, and the absolute passion and positivity that has gone on over the course of the past few years, that's what you're actually witnessing. It's the embodiment of that quote.

You know, millions of people in America are really representative of that whole ideology. It's made possible by net neutrality and a free and open Internet. When you become producers of opinion, rather than consumers of opinion, that is happening. It's incredible, the amount of creativity that we're seeing right now.

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I'm sure you've seen the millions of Bernie Sanders graphics and memes, and short video clips, and tweets, and Vines, and Instagrams. It just goes on and on.

For the most part, it is shocking how positive and creative that experience has been.

RD: You've been involved in movement work at least since Occupy, back in 2011. We're experiencing a lot of movement on the Left not just here in the US, but around the world, France, Spain, Finland, for example. Do you see a global scope to this movement, and to this work? Is that the next step, connecting globally?

WW: Well, yes. The calibration now is to intercept and to cooperate with European groups, who are building broad-based power. What we're seeing in Spain is very important. I think that these are Marxists, who have unified their Left parties to win eighty seats in a parliament of three-hundred-and-fifty. That's not insignificant. That can be done here in America as well. We need to learn from each other.

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Even though you might see me as having gone on the radar with Occupy Wall Street, the reality is that when I was a young woman in my late teens and early twenties, I was involved with Food Not Bombs and other efforts, which led me to Occupy. And I will never be a Democrat, in that sense of the word. **I am an anarcho-syndicalist, and I'm a proud anarcho-syndicalist.** It's a way of life based on the broad principles of cooperation and mutualism.

The work that we're doing directly addresses the need to not just reform capitalism, but *end* capitalism. And you're not going to hear that from a Democratic Party operative.

I have no hesitation or shyness in me when it comes to being vocal about the need to end capitalism. Capitalism is working for the one percent, but it's clearly not working for most people.



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